

in a dream where the air is soft by a simple space nerd

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Summary: El has hair slicked back behind her ears, darkly ringed eyes, and somewhat bedraggled clothes, and Max would normally steer clear of people looking like her but she's heard so much about El, and God, why is this group of friends so unlike everyone else Max has ever met? Max never used to care about what random people thought of her. "Curse you, stalker," she mutters half-heartedly.

in a dream where the air is soft

The thing is, Max actually likes Mike. He's smart, he's thoughtful, resourceful, and he's caring, at least towards his friends. Which Max isn't. As he keeps reminding her.

It would be so much easier if he was always a jerk, but Max can tell straight from the get go that he isn't. Moody, maybe, and wary, but a jerk? No. He looks at Will like he's hung the stars, and Dustin and Lucas may argue with him but they trust him impeccably, for some reason. So. Not a jerk. The problem is that for some reason, he just doesn't like her. She'd thought that maybe if she joined their party, if she stuck around... but no. There's been a moment, in the school gym, where he'd been smiling and victory had flared up in her chest for a few minutes, but then it was gone as he stared towards the door with an inscrutable look on his face.

She shouldn't care this much about what Mike thinks, really, she knows, but it's hard not to. He's the team leader. He's the Paladin. He's Mike, and Dustin may call their party a democracy, but they all trust Mike. So if Mike doesn't like her, it's hard to feel welcome in their little ragtag bunch. It's not that she needs his approval, but... well. It would be nice, is all. It could be nice.

"You're okay, Mad Max," says Mike, a long time later, when they're all bunched up together in the car. Steve is driving, Dustin warily sitting next to him, and Max thinks grudgingly that even concussed to hell and back, Steve is a better driver than her. Whatever. She's got time.

Max stares at him in shock, lips twitching into a smile, and Mike manages to smile back, looking tired but alive, and Max relaxes into the seat and grins to herself. Lucas nudges her, grinning like a shark, and Max rolls her eyes and elbows him, feigning nonchalance.

So Mike is okay with her. Good. It would've sucked if he still couldn't stand her after fighting a herd of demodogs together. Max even finds the time to be concerned for him, privately, because he hasn't said much about what happened in Hawkins Lab, and Joyce looked so traumatised that Max thought she might collapse on the spot. In fact,

Mike hasn't said anything about the frankly terrifying ordeal they all went through together not even an hour ago, while they wait for the Byers or Hopper to pull into the driveway. Mike was the one who spurred them all into action, and Max wonders dryly if he only becomes friends with people who'll follow him headfirst into danger. Honestly, at this point... look, she wouldn't be *surprised*, is all she's saying.

And then just when she's getting somewhere with Mike, Eleven shows up.

"This is like Mike all over again," Max moans to Lucas, as El talks with Joyce and they all pretend not to hear Mike's muffled yelling from next door.

"Hey," chides Lucas, bumping shoulders with her. "Don't. You got somewhere with Mike, you'll get there with El. Just... she's been though a lot."

Max bristles but then deflates, trying to conspicuously look at El, still nestled in Joyce's arms. El has hair slicked back behind her ears, darkly ringed eyes, and somewhat bedraggled clothes, and Max would normally steer clear of people looking like her but she's heard so much about El, and God, why is this group of friends so unlike everyone else Max has ever met? Max never *used* to care about what random people thought of her.

"Curse you, stalker," she mutters half-heartedly, and he looks at her bemusedly but Max can't be bothered to explain.

Mike's so clearly stressed that Max can't even find it in herself to hassle him. With every creak and groan of the house, his eyes dart towards the door. Dustin is yammering away to a barely conscious Steve, who's been dumped unceremoniously on the couch, bat still in hand. There's some blood on the carpet that they're all steering clear of, and Billy, that jackass, fled sometimes before they arrived back at the Byers house. Mike isn't pacing anymore, thank God, and he's actually doing a really good job of keeping Dustin from panicking, reassuring Steve that they're all fine, and talking evenly to Max and

Lucas.

Max, for her part, doesn't know how to feel. She's freaked out, yeah, definitely, but she's also... not. Not as much as she should be, though considering who she's hanging out with, at least they're all in the same boat. Mike's way more anxious about how Eleven's doing than his near-death from half-an-hour ago, and Lucas keeps rubbing at the place where Billy picked him up, but he isn't even looking at the burned soles of his shoes, and Dustin is entirely focused on Steve and not the gunk still clinging to the curls of his hair.

"Mike," Max declares abruptly, not wanting to be stuck with her thoughts any longer, not now, not in this weird-ass house that still has drawn tentacles over every inch of the walls. "Tell me what to do."

Mike looks at her, surprised, and his gaze softens, like he knows what she's going through, which maybe he does, and then it hardens like he knows what she needs to be doing, which she guesses she's about to find out. "Can you watch the windows? To let us know if anyone's coming. Don't be seen." He pauses, and she turns away, relieved, but then he calls out again, "Max." She spins back to him and he sends her a smile, exhausted but genuine. "Thanks."

Max smiles back, somehow feeling like this is the most surreal part of tonight. Mike Wheeler is smiling, and he's smiling at her. "No problem, Paladin," she replies, and he grins.

"Car!" Lucas whirls on his feet to face her, eyes wide, and Max squints through the blinds, making sure to stay out of sight—god, what a rookie mistake they'd made with Billy—and Lucas slips beside her, aiming his slingshot at the door, while Mike appears at the doorway, Steve's bat in hand. Max can hear Steve's protests from here, and Dustin's frantically placating reassurances.

"It's..." Max squints, the car's headlights clicking off. "Byers. It's Will! Mike! Mike, it's Will!"

Mike is instantly at her side, crouched down underneath the window and peering through it, double checking, and then he breathes out a tiny sigh of relief, leaning his shoulder against the wall. Lucas goes to

open the door but Mike throws out a hand, "Wait."

He looks at each of them, holding their gazes, and Max realises she's holding in a breath. (And also that she's following his lead, for some reason. What the hell. Not like this day could get any weirder, right?) "Wait," Mike repeats, voice low, and turns his gaze back to the window, shifting his grip on the baseball bat. "Wait for them to come out."

Lucas nods once, firmly, and Max looks down in surprise when Mike hands her the bat, pulling out a shard of a broken plate from his pocket and holding it cautiously between his fingers. (The plate that her *asshole shit-for-brains* step-brother smashed on Steve's head, poor Steve who was only trying to project them, protect *her*, protect *Lucas, god.*)

"Thanks," Max whispers, and Mike shrugs.

They watch, with bated breath, as the car's door opens. It's Jonathon who steps out, and two arms are passing him Will, and then Nancy appears from the other side of the car, and then Joyce clammers out, and; "Thank God," says Mike, relieved, and Lucas throws open the door.

"Jonathan!" Jonathan looks up at Lucas' shout, Will hanging limply in his arms. Max jumps to her feet, Mike by her side until he rushes out the door, watching wide-eyed as Will is hustled inside, Mrs Byers and Mike clinging to his side, Mike's hands floating helplessly by his side.

Nancy frowns at her brother. "What the hell happened to you?" She demands, and Mike looks at her in confusion, at which point Max realises that all of them are, to some degree, relatively battered and/or filthy from their encounter with the Upside Down.

"Clear the couch," Jonathan breathes out, providing effective distraction for Nancy, and Mike grimaces visibly.

"Shit, shit," he mutters, and then, pointing a finger at Jonathan, "Don't move." With that, he dashes away into the house, Jonathan staring at him in dazed confusion, Mrs Byers tugging at the edges of Lucas' coat and shooting confused glances at Max.

A minute later, Mike reappears at the doorway, waving a hand for them to follow. The entire group follows, save Lucas, who tells Max that he'll take guard duty. The room they walk into looks as bad as Max remembers it, shards of glass still scattered over the floor, blood in the carpet, except now the couch is vacant and Steve's leaning heavily against the wall, blinking blearily at the new arrivals while Dustin sticks to his side like glue, supporting the side that isn't on the wall.

Nancy shrieks, hands flying to her face, while Jonathan stops walking and stares blatantly, as they say in tandem: "Steve?"

Steve blinks again, looking groggy, and makes a movement towards them, which Dustin quickly stops, putting a hand to Steve's chest. "Whoa, buddy," He mutters, and Steve looks down at him in confusion.

Jonathan lies Will onto the couch, looking close to keeling over himself, and Mike is instantly at his side, taking Will's hand and holding his second hand up to Will's forehead, frowning and looking somehow both vulnerable and protective. Nancy has flown over to Steve, hands hovering around his face helplessly, while Steve, for his part, blinks in bemusement and attempts to bat her hands away. Mrs Beyers takes one look around the room, seems to steel herself against the mental breakdown that most moms Max knows would be experiencing, and then busies herself wetting cloths and lying them across Will's body, whispering to him and squeezing Mike's shoulder.

Max feels terribly, terribly out of her depth. And somehow, Mike must know this, because he looks up and meets her gaze. *Go*, he mouths, *it's okay*, and with that Max heads back to Lucas, still standing guard by the now reclosed door.

"Hey." Lucas greets her, sounding just as he always has, and suddenly Max's throat feels unexpectedly clogged up.

"Hey," she whispers back, and reaches out to grab hold of his hand.

By the time the truck pulls into the driveway, Max and Lucas are sitting side-to-side, backs pressed against the wall underneath the

window, and Mac is, against all odds, nearly drifting off on Lucas' shoulder. It hasn't even been that long since the Byers and Nancy arrived, forty minutes at most. Mrs Byers has come by once, to see how they were doing, with an easy familiarity that made Max smile at her despite everything else. Mike, too, has been out a few times, sitting with them for a while, before going back to Will and Dustin, who's still dealing with a very much concussed Steve, who's being fussed over by Nancy and Jonathan as well.

They haven't really explained what happened, where they went, what they did. Mike briefly mentioned Billy, and that they got rid of the tunnels Hopper got stuck in, but he doesn't seem too eager to expose the rest of their adventure, so Max and the others let it be. Mike, Dustin, and Lucas have also all called their parents houses, claiming clause of sleepover, while Max is just hoping that Billy will have thought of some excuse as for why he's returning home empty handed. No way would her parents believe her if she called from some fictional girl's house.

When the truck rolls in, Max's eyes fly open, and Lucas fumbles for his slingshot, scrambling to his feet while Max twists and pushes the blinds out of the way, squinting against the harsh light of the truck, as Mike comes skidding out of the living room.

"Who is it?" His eyes are wide, voice breathless, and Ma doesn't even turn to look at him, moving her knees so that she can see better.

"It's Chief Hopper's truck," She announces after a moment, and Mike sags for a moment like his strings have been cut.

He rushes for the door but Lucas holds out a hand to Mike's chest, nervous. "What happened to waiting until the door opened?"

Mike rolls his eyes and pushes away Lucas' hand, but there's no malice to it. "As if Hopper would let anyone drive his truck," he replies, and Lucas can only shrug to that, stepping back as Mike opens the door and makes his way to the truck.

"C'mon," Lucas adds after a second, glancing back at Max, and she jogs to catch up with him as they walk out onto the driveway.

Chief Hopper is just pulling Eleven from the truck when they all come tumbling out of the house, Mike faltering as he catches a sight of Eleven's limp form, Hopper pulling her into his arms. Hopper catches sight of them, his eyes landing on Mike in front of him, and Max expects—she doesn't know, *something*—but all that happens is that Mike straightens, his fingers twitching at his sides. "Is she okay?"

Hopper looks down at the girl cradled in his arms, and back to Mike.

"She did it?" This is Lucas, calling out bravely. "El closed the Gate?"

Hopper grunts, passing by Mike, though not as gruffly as he might have, shouldering his way into the house. "Yeah, kid," he says. "She did it."

Lucas whoops, and Max grins as he wraps her into a side-hug before bashfully pulling away, but Mike frowns.

"Hey," he complains, voice sharp as he follows Hopper. "Is she *okay*?"

Max and Lucas exchange newly-concerned glances and hurry back into the house, in time to see Hopper laying Eleven down onto the loveseat next to the couch where Will is perched, leaning up against the couch armrest and staring wide-eyed at Eleven.

"Oh, God," says Joyce, "shit, God. Is she okay? Hop? Did she do it?"

Chief Hopper turns to Joyce, something raw in his face, affection lining his features as his (shaking) fingers brush some of Eleven's hair out of her face. "Yeah." His voice is gruff, and trembling. "Yeah, she did it." Joyce slumps, relieved, and her hands fall onto Chief Hopper's shoulders as she lets her head drop forward, taking a few uncertain breaths.

Mike is standing by the side of the chair, in between Will and Eleven, his concerned gaze fixated on Eleven's face, and as Max and Lucas move closer she can understand why. Twin trails of blood drip down Eleven's face, over her lips and onto her chin, and her ears have blood leaking from them too. The skin around her eyes has darkened, looking veiny and shadowed, cheeks sunken.

"Just like last time," Dustin breaths, because somehow he's

reappeared by their sides, and Lucas nods grimly. Max assumes they're talking about what happened last year, when Eleven killed the Demogorgon, and her frown grows.

"Hey," she says, interrupting whatever silent vigil was going on. "Is she gonna be okay?"

Chief Hopper looks at her, somewhat incredulous. "Who are you again?"

Max's eyes narrow, and Lucas and Dustin send her identical glances out of the corners of their eyes.

"Is she gonna be *okay*," Mike repeats, and Hopper must hear something non-negotiable in his voice because he raises his eyebrows and turns back to Eleven.

"Yeah," he answers, and max an hear the exhaustion in his voice. "I think so. You said... last year... she had to recharge after using a lot of power. I think this is gonna be like that. She used a shit-ton of power tonight." His fingers trace the side of Eleven's face, and while Mike had relaxed visibly after Hopper said she'd be okay, he frowns now, arms crossed over his chest.

"What happened?"

Hopper squints at him. "Now, Wheeler? Really?"

Mike's face is inscrutable, and Hopper sighs. "We deserve to know," Mike replies stonily, and Hopper's face twitches.

And then he tells them.

(Doctor Owen, bleeding but alive. Will looks relieved, but only just.) (The shadow behind the gate, disappearing from view. Dustin runs a shaky hand through his curls.) (The way Eleven had rose into the air, screaming, blood pouring from her nose. Mike's hands, fisted, uncurl as he sits on the floor beside Eleven, his hand touching her leg.) (The gate, resealing itself as Eleven moved it with only her mind. Joyce exhales shakily and starts to laugh, tears leaking from the corners of her eyes as Jonathan finds his way to his mother's side and takes her

hand.) (The way that as they rose back up to the light, dead demodogs had fallen from every side of the Upside Down. And Jonoathan and Steve and Nancy slump against each other in what has to be the weirdest dynamic has seen yet.)

"I don't know what you guys saw last year, in the school," Hopper tells them, running a hand through his hair, hat abandoned, "but this... this was so much more."

That night, they all stay at the Byers. Jonathan and Will take the couch, heads on opposite ends. They drag out mattresses and blankets and Max stars in wonder and bemusement as this raggedy group of people slot together into the living room far too small for their number, but somehow it works anyway.

El is moved from the loveseat down onto a mattress, lying horizontal to the couch, and Hopper lies next to her, Joyce next to him, keeping a firm grip on Will's hand, dangling down from the couch. On El's other side is Mike, because at this point not even a natural disaster could keep him from her, and beside him lies Nancy. Next mattress over is Steve, carefully not touching Nancy, and beside him lies Dustin, Lucas, and then Max herself, uncertain until Lucas had grabbed her hand and pulled her down with them.

Max falls asleep to the sound of people breathing around her, Nancy's soft snoring, Dustin mumbling something in his sleep, and as her eyes drift shut she finds the time to think about how strange it is that this is what the small town of Hawkins has brought her.

She wakes when Steve's foot collides with her hip.

Blinking blearily, she stares up at him, discovering that first of all, one of Lucas's arms is raped over her side, max herself nestled into a groove of his shouder, and secondly, Steve does Not Look Good.

"Sorry," Steve mumbles, slurring a little and Max narrows her eyes, watching as he fumbles his way around the mass of people, stepping precariously over entangled limbs, in a maze of bodies that he looks woefully unequipped to navigate.

"Steve?"

He waves a hand at her, saying very unconvincingly, "M'fine."

Max tries to push herself up on one elbow, Lucas' arm nestling more snuggly around her waist. "What're you doing?"

"Bathroom," Steve mumbles, almost stepping on Mike's hand, and Max relaxes back into Lucas, still watching him warily, something about the way Steve is moving setting her on edge.

He finally makes it through the tangle of arms and legs and torsos, disappearing around the corner, bumping into the wall a few times, and then eventually opening a door, out of sight.

A few seconds later, Max pushes her way out of Lucas' hold, frowning as she hers Steve retching.

"Steve?" He doesn't reply, and Max's concern grows. "Hey, Lucas, asshole, wake *up*, stalker—" Lucas blinks groggily, frowning at Max, and she glares back. "Steve's sick," Max declares, though Lucas seems much more concerned with detangling their bodies as fast as he can. Max rolls her eyes, though she can feel her face burning, and shoves him with both hands.

"Steve's sick," she repeats, and Dustin, awakened by Lucas bumping into him, makes noises of confusion.

"Whazzat?"

Max groans, not bothering to keep quiet anymore, because Steve is *still* throwing up and Max doesn't have much experience with sick people but she knows that can't be good. "Steve is *sick*," she complains. "I think something's wrong with him." That gets Dustin awake instantly, jolting upright so quickly that one of his flailing arms whacks Nancy on the shoulder.

"Steve's sick?" Nancy's words are soft, confused, kind of raspy, and Mike groans beside her.

"Yes," Max whisper-shouts.

"Why the hell are none of you checking on him, then?" Mike's voice is scratchy and somewhat annoyed, and Dustin and Lucas swivel their heads towards his figure, easier to see now that Max's eyes have adjusted to the darkness.

"Didn't Billy smash that plate on his head earlier?" Dustin's voice sounds suddenly small, and Max feels an icy cold fear slithering itself into her gut and along her spine.

"Shit, shit," Dustin chants, throwing off his blankets and scrambling out of the nest of blankets he'd amassed around himself, heading towards where Max'd seen Steve disappear. Lucas and Max are up next, and then Mike and Nancy, and somehow in the confusion Eleven wakes up, tagging along beside Mike with one hand holding onto his sleeve as they rush towards the bathroom. Lucas trips over Chief Hopper and yelps, Hopper's eyes opening immediately, already annoyed.

Lucas stays behind to explain the situation, sending Max a betrayed look as she abandons him to go find Steve, and she can hear Hopper's monosyllabic questions become less annoyed and more concerned.

They find Steve hunched over the toilet, throwing up, and Dustin swears elaborately. "Ah, shit, Steve, buddy, what's going on?"

Steve looks up at them, disorientated, and frowns, waving a shaky hand at them. "What're you... why're there more'f you?"

Hopper appears behind Max's shoulder in the doorframe, and she squeaks, but he spares her not even a glance as he bustles over to Steve's prone form, placing a hand on his shoulder and the other hand on the back of Steve's neck, cussing softly when his hand comes away red.

By now, everyone seems to be awake, Nancy's eyes wide and frightened, Jonathan looking weirdly concerned for his maybe-girlfriend's probably-ex. "Steve, honey," Joyce's voice sounds motherly and warm, but there's a frantic undertone that worries Max. She and Mike exchange glance, Mike stepping closer to Steve, who's still got Hopper's hand on the back of his head and Dustin hanging off of his shoulder.

"Oh, shit," mumbles Hopper, and that's how it starts.

Hopper takes Steve in his truck, saying that they don't have time to wait for an ambulance. Dustin, who's near tears now, looks like he's going to physically fight Nancy when she tries to argue that she should be the third person in the car. Mike pulls Nancy back, holding her hand tightly and then pushing her in Jonathan's direction with enough care that she doesn't trip.

"Dustin," he calls out, and Dustin's worried eyes meet his through Hopper's window, Steve's head lolling on Dustin's shoulder, Hopper using one hand to start the engine and the other to reach behind him and pat Steve's cheek, keeping him awake. Mike doesn't hesitate. "Make sure he's okay."

Dustin nods, looking too exhausted to try for a smile, and then they're gone.

With three of their number gone, the whole group feels disjointed and out of whack. Nancy and Jonathan look helpless and shaken, Joyce seems like she's deflated even more without Hopper, and Max and the others are twitchy and unsettled, uneasy about separation, no matter how necessary it was. It's still dark outside, and the house is still a mess, and things feel too still and *wrong*.

"Hey." Mike's voice jostles Max out of her thoughts, and she looks up at him from her spot on the couch, blanket strewn sloppily over her legs. Lucas lies on the opposite end of the couch, neck at an unnatural angle as he dozes, knees pulled up in front of his chest. Mike's standing in front of her, and max's eyes fly to the girl by his side. Eleven. Her hand is in Mike's, her hair even messier than Mike's can get, curling at the ends and no longer gelled back smoothly. She's still wearing her clothes from earlier, but the makeup is gone, and it makes her look more human.

"Hey," Max echoes, and Mike winces a bit at her tone, probably remembering that a couple days ago he couldn't stand to be around her.

"This is El," Mike says instead, pushing on, and Max nods slowly.

"I know."

Mike glances at Eleven, confused, and interestingly, Eleven flushes.

"Met," she explains, and Mike nods in comprehension.

"Oh! Um, cool. Uh, I just thought, since everything's been so... busy... Anyway." Max raises an eyebrow. "Anyway! I wanted to say thanks, for everything." Max feels weirdly vulnerable, listening to Mike talk, refusing to shy away from the bold gaze she can feel from Eleven.

"We couldn't have done it without you," Mike continues, smiling at her, genuinely, and despite herself, Max feels a small glow of satisfaction in her belly.

"Yeah, well. Zoomer."

Mike's smile stretches into a grin. "Yeah. Zoomer. Welcome to the party, I guess." He rubs at the back of his neck with his free hand, Eleven still standing silent beside him, and suddenly the whole thing is so absurd that Max has to snort, laughing. El makes a strange expression but Mike just laughs with her, and Max thinks okay, maybe this can work.

(She stood up to Billy for them. They stood up to Billy for her. There's no going back from this, not anymore, even if she wanted to.)

Weeks later, and Steve is driving her to Mike's house. He's not even complaining, he's so glad to be allowed behind a wheel again. (Steve's face is a canvas of mottled greens and yellows and purples, though his cuts have closed up, and Max had felt guilt eating away at her every time she looked at him until Steve had told her that he's proud, in a way, because he'd earned those wounds trying to protect the party, and he doesn't regret it because if Billy was beating on him, he wasn't beating on them. That'd stopped some of the guilt, at least, and Max had wrapped Steve into a hug uncharacteristic for her.)

Also, he's complaining about something else now. "Hey, dipshits, tone it down!" Dustin flips him off and Steve lifts one hand off the wheel

to return the gesture. Max is leaning from the back and in between the front seats so she has a better vantage point, which Steve hates, because she's pretty sure that she can drive better than him now anyways and she deserves to be allowed to prove it. Dustin and Lucas sit on the other sides of her, arguing about the best way to explain that stupid game she's been roped into trying, because *it's a tradition, Max!* and *we're called a party for a reason!*

In the front, beside Steve, sits Will. Steve's somehow earned the badge of Trusted Individual, which Dustin thinks is hilarious, because they kidnapped him and he got beat to hell and back and then ended up helping them do what they wanted to do in the first place, but according to Joyce, that just means he was doing a good job, and he protected them, and, well. ("Not my fault you're all shits," Steve says, smiling.) But because Steve's a Trusted Individual, he's allowed to drive Will around, and because Will is, according to Steve, the "only one of you little shits who I even *remotely* trust," he's allowed to sit in the front seat, which is *so unfair*.

Max drives them *one time* and suddenly she can't even approach the car without Steve eyeing her suspiciously.

"Steve," she whines, "go faster."

"No," Steve replies smugly, and Max groans, dropping her head onto her arms, still stretching forward in her seat to reach the front.

"Steve. Steve." Steve *slows down* in retaliation, and Will hides his smile by pretending to look outside the window. Max sees it anyways and narrows her eyes.

Dustin makes an offended gasp and something Lucas has just said, and Max gives up on Steve and turns back to the backseats, internally bemoaning her placement in the seat arrangements, right in between the two bickering boys.

"I should have skateboarded," she complains, and Lucas turns wounded eyes on her.

"And abandon the party bus?"

"Hey!" Steve waves a finger threateningly. "This is *not* a bus, this is a *one-time* thing," and they all know he doesn't mean it in the slightest.

Dungeons and Dragons makes *no sense*. Max kind of loves it. Actually, honestly, more than the game itself, she loves *this*. Gathered around the table in Mike's basement, eating cookies Nancy's made for them, the group clamouring to teach her the rules of something they all so clearly care about. It feels normal, like something a (mostly) normal group would do, a fun way to spend time together, and for the first time since she's been hanging out with them, Max feels one hundred percent wanted, irrevocably welcome.

Even Eleven isn't as dismissive as she usually is. Which isn't to say that she talks to Max, or that she acknowledges max, or... Okay, well, ninety percent welcome, then. Mike's watching his friends bicker with a fond glow in his eyes, holding El's hand, their knees touching, glancing at her or Will every few minutes to make a comment that they'll both smile at. Lucas and Dustin, on the other hand, are loudly debating the merits of Max becoming a rogue.

Max huffs, exasperated without any annoyance, and pushes away from the table. "Calm down, I'm just getting some water." Dustin and Lucas relax, trading embarrassed glances, and Max grins, heading up the stairs and towards the Wheeler's kitchen.

She's just filled up a glass when a soft sound comes from the entryway, and Max turns to see Eleven. "Oh! El." Max immediately looks behind her, looking for Mike or Nancy or someone, but no. Just Eleven. What the hell does she want? Max has only seen Eleven twice, now three times, since the day the gate closed, and Max hasn't spoken to Eleven since that first disastrous attempt at connection, which Max tries not to think about for too long. Eleven, for her part, mostly just ignores her. She must have talked to Mike or something, because she doesn't seem to actively hate Max, but she definitely isn't warm and fuzzy.

Which is... fine. Max would *like* to have another friend, especially a girl friend, and especially the girl who's enamoured Max's only other friends in this whole town, and especially the girl who's done all that and also saved the world a few times, but. Can't have everything,

Max guesses.

"Max." Eleven's never really talked to her before, so this is weird. This is... weird.

"Sorry, um..." Max hopes Eleven hasn't come here to threaten her, or explode her brains, or something. She doubts Eleven would do that, but what does she know? It's not like they've *talked*. "I'll just..."

She tries to figure out a way to get to the door with minimal contact, already dreaming of re-joining the conversation downstairs and not having to think of this again, but then Eleven says: "Wait."

Max freezes, only a few steps away from the sink. There's a very long few moments of silence, and Max stares at Eleven. maybe she was wrong, maybe Eleven is going to explode her brains after all. Dustin says he thinks Eleven was jealous of Max, but that's crazy. Eleven is a badass, powerful, amazing fearless superhero. What the hell does Max have that Eleven doesn't? (Apart from, you know, a childhood and an education and some non-traumatic memories, and... okay, Max thoroughly regrets thinking that.)

And then Eleven sticks out her hand. It's jilted and awkward and Max doubts Eleven has ever shook anybody's hand ever, but it's also strangely determined, and Eleven's eyes look fierce. What the hell?

"I'm El," says Eleven, and Max stares at her.

She doesn't move to take the outstretched hand, and briefly she considers brushing past her like Eleven had done to her, and then: "Friends?" That's unexpected. Max stares, hating how vulnerable she feels suddenly, but Eleven seems fine waiting for her. She's not getting mad, and she's not pulling back her hand, and... Max does want to be friends with Eleven, she *does*.

"Yeah," Max answers, taking a breath and stepping forward, gripping Eleven's fingers in her own before she can lose her nerve. "Okay. Friends." She smiles uncertainly, hoping she's doing this right, and then Eleven smiles back, and *oh*.

Eleven pulls Max into a hug, her wiry arms encircling Max's body,

and Max's arms flounder for a moment before she returns the hug, smiling into Eleven's shoulder. This is real, Max thinks suddenly. This is real, and Eleven—El—wants to be friends with me, and she's hugging me even though everyone says El's not good with contact and El doesn't like touching people she doesn't know. And with Eleven's smiling face in front of her, easy and natural and determined, Max grins back and thinks: *Eleven wants to be friends with me, holy shit.*

El doesn't let go of her hand, as they make their way out the kitchen and down the stairs. El's hand is warm and soft in Max's hand, and it feels reassuring and almost familiar, and as the boys all stop talking in amazement at the sight of the two girls hand-in-hand, Max grins.

Max plops back down between Dustin and Lucas, still grinning, El wearing the same somewhat stunned expression from where she sits halfway on top of Mike. The game starts back up again soon enough; Dustin and Lucas finding a way to argue about something they agree on, Mike's excited narration sounding inclusive and welcoming, Will's quiet laughter a warm presence in the room, El humming under her breath sometimes and looking up every few minutes to send Max smiles, and it feels like the last piece of the puzzle has slotted into place.